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XV.—THE RELATION OF THE ENGLISH “CHARACTER” TO ITS GREEK PROTOTYPE.

The writing of “Characters”¹ was at the same time one of the most prolific and the most significant phases of literary activity in the seventeenth century. Though many of these books of “Characters” have been forgotten, the titles of over one hundred and fifty are still remembered—enough certainly to show how popular the fashion of such writing was. Furthermore, its significance becomes apparent when we consider what prose fiction owes to it; for, through the periodical essay of the eighteenth century, the old formal “Character” passed into the novel and become a part of it.²

In a consideration of the beginnings of English “Character-writing” we see at once that the writing of “Characters” was not in England wholly of native origin. True, something resembling it had appeared considerably before 1608, when the first book of “Characters” was published. Indeed, as early as about the middle of the preceding century had appeared the first of a series of books which must be regarded as the immediate precursors of the “Character-books.” This was Thomas Audley’s *Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561).³ All

¹ Curiously enough, modern lexicographers have ignored the meaning which the word *character* came to possess in the seventeenth century. The “Character” was a formal enumeration, partly individualized, of the habits and peculiarities that serve to differentiate a social, ethical, or political type.

² Taine says (*History of English Literature*, vol. 2, p. 112) that in the *Sir Roger de Coverley Papers* Addison invented the novel without suspecting it.

³ To this Thomas Harman was indebted for most of the material for his *Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1567). This in turn was followed in 1592 by Robert Greene’s *Groundwork of Coney-Catching*, which was practically a reprint of Harman’s book. The same may be said of Decker’s *Bellman of London* (1608). The last of the series was *The English Rogue* (1665). This contains a vocabulary, alphabetically arranged, of the cant words in use among the gypsies, which was borrowed from Harman’s *Caveat*.

these books were a mixed product of the taste which made popular the translation of such books as Mateo Aleman's *Guzman de Alfarache* and of the newly awakened interest in character analysis that marked the beginning of the decline of the Renaissance.

The old order had begun to change even before Shakespeare's death. The drama, which more than any other form of literary expression had interpreted and satisfied the popular craving for vigorous life and action, had even before 1608 begun to decay. By that time Shakespeare's great tragedies had all been written.¹ Marlowe had been stopped in the midst of his doubts, his passionate longings, his defiance, his love-making, and his fame in the old Deptford ale-house fifteen years before. The last of Jonson's three great comedies, *The Alchemist*, was not acted, it is true, till 1610; but Jonson had not, like Shakespeare, held the mirror up to nature. Not content to let his *dramatis personae* reveal themselves in action, he had, by a preference due to the analytic quality of his mind, too often attempted to reveal them himself.² In his social comedies we feel that we are among qualities and types rather than living persons, among abstractions and not characters. So, too, one has but to read the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher, who continued to write till they died, the former in 1616, the latter in 1625, and in whose plays everything—development of character, dramatic

¹ Only six of his plays, *Pericles*, *Tempest*, *Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale*, *Two Noble Kinsmen* (?), and *Henry VIII.* are assigned to a date later than 1608.

² To the list of *dramatis personae* in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (acted 1599) Jonson affixed "Characters of the persons." All through his plays Jonson carries to an extreme the stage convention of making the actors who are on the stage describe those about to enter. In *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) he not only has each person that has any part in the action described in this way, but he even puts into the mouths of the actors characters of some who have not the remotest connection with the plot. In writing these Characters, Jonson was influenced by Theophrastus, the Greek father of "Character-writing." See my article in *Modern Language Notes*, November, 1901.

probability, and even decency are sacrificed to the quest for brilliant situations—to realize that under the Stuarts the creative impulse of the Renaissance was slowly dying away. Now creative impulses occur in pulsations. In the history of every people we find an ebb and flow of literary productiveness, a great creative period being invariably followed by one of analysis. Of this fact Greece in the fourth century B. C. and seventeenth-century England are corresponding illustrations. Each had been preceded by periods of creative activity, and each was then undergoing a precisely similar transformation. “It was in accordance with the philosophic impulse of the age,” I quote from Curtius,¹ “that not individual personages, but general types of character were represented, which repeated themselves in men of the same species; thus there were brought on the stage the usurer, the gamester, the parasite, and again the dandy virtuoso, the cunning slave, the clumsy peasant—they appeared under fictitious names, which thereby acquired an universal significance.” That Sophocles was followed by Menander, and he by Theophrastus was not accidental; no more so than that Shakespeare was followed by Jonson and he by Hall. In both cases the transition was from the display of character in action to the consideration of character in and for itself, and in both cases the explanation is the same, namely, that the creative was giving place to the analytic spirit.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when Joseph Hall² in an age that was becoming more interested in the exhibition

¹ Vol. 5, Bk. 7, c. 2.

² Joseph Hall was at this time thirty-four years old. He had already become fairly well known through his published works. These had been: a poem contributed to a collection of elegies on the death of Dr. William Whittaker; his *Satires* (1597–8); and his *Meditations*, containing a hundred religious aphorisms and reflections. He had published also his final volume of verse, *The King's Prophecy, or Weeping Joy* (1603), congratulating James on his accession to the throne; and, at Frankfort (1605), he had published in Latin his *Mundus Alter et Idem*. This was translated into English in 1608 by John Healey under the title, *The Discovery of a New World*.

than in the development of character, sat down to write his *Characterisms of Virtues and Vices* (1608) he should have turned for a model to Theophrastus. This was the more natural because the *Ethical Characters* of Theophrastus had been in a measure popularized by Casaubon in a Latin translation which had appeared first in 1592, and been followed in 1598 by a second edition.¹ The "Ἠθικοί Χαρακτήρες" of Theophrastus, in the form in which we know it,² consists of thirty short character-sketches. In all of them the method of portrayal is the same, and is simplicity itself. It consists in defining a quality, and then proceeding to enumerate the things the type of man embodying that quality may be expected to do under given conditions.

The excellencies and defects of such a method are at once apparent. The first impression that one gets is definiteness. Theophrastus seems always to have started with a clear idea in mind of the kind of type he wished to characterize, and then to have chosen for its illustration incidents remarkable no less for their fitness than for their brevity. It must be admitted, however, that though the type is shown to us in outline bold and clear-cut, and though the incidents for its illustration are fitly chosen, one desideratum of the character-sketch is lacking, namely individuality. The character-sketch should not only appeal to us as being justly typical of a class, but should be drawn with such attention to detail that we should be almost, if not quite, tricked into the belief that the portrait is after all that of an individual. Indeed, such have been the best of the "Character-books," both English and French. So deceptive were some of them that their publication was followed almost immediately by that of numerous

¹ The book seems to have been known to Englishmen long before this. Thomas Nash mentions it in one of his tracts (*The Anatomy of Absurdity*, 1589); and Chaucer evidently had read it, for he alludes to it in the *Prologue* to the *Tale of the Wife of Bath*, line 671.

² Some scholars consider the extant collection to be but a fragment of a longer ethical treatise.

“keys,” each claiming to identify beyond a doubt the separate “Characters” as portraits of certain of the author’s contemporaries—a claim, it may be added, which only the hopeless divergence of opinion among the authors of the various “keys” could serve in the least to invalidate.¹ Again, a weakness of Theophrastus’ method appears in the fact that there is in the sketches almost no analysis of character. Indeed there can be none where a writer contents himself with simply enumerating the actions, not necessarily connected, which may be expected from a representative of such a type as he is describing. One of the most noticeable features of the book (one can scarcely call it a defect) is an utter lack on the part of Theophrastus of any attempt to be didactic, as well as of any attempt to satirize the vices of Athenian society. The *Evil-speaker* is his worst character. But the *κακολόγος* here described is too eager and outspoken to be a detractor of the most vicious kind. This, like all the other sketches, seems to have been written in a half humorous vein, the humor showing itself in the selection of incidents, which, though not convulsingly ludicrous, and often inclining to coarseness, are on the whole mildly productive of mirth.

From this model Hall departed widely in the spirit of his work, while following it pretty closely with respect to method. The first difference one notices is Hall’s gravity of subject and of manner as compared with Theophrastus. Hall’s book consists of twenty-two “Characters”—eleven of virtues and eleven of vices. Of these latter, while six have the same titles as those of Theophrastus, the other five are typical vices of a far more serious kind than any the genial Greek philosopher had seen fit to include. Thus the *Hypocrite* heads the list, “an angel abroad, a devil at home; and worse when an angel than when a devil.” Hall’s manner is always dignified, sometimes even stately. Very seldom does he become

¹A case in point is the swarm of “keys” that followed the publication in 1688 of La Bruyère’s *Caractères, ou Les Mœurs de ce Siècle*.

in the least humorous like Theophrastus. Perhaps the nearest approach to the Theophrastic manner in this respect is at the end of the *Character of a Covetous Man*, where it is said "Gain is his godliness" and "He cares not (for no great advantage) to lose his friend, pine his body, and damn his soul; and would despatch himself when corn falls; but that he is loath to cast away money on a cord." Moreover, Hall departed from his original, not only in subject and in manner, but to some extent in method also. And in this he set the fashion for the English school of "Character-writers." Instead of merely describing the actions proper to a character, as Theophrastus had done, he comments upon it in general terms, aiming at epigram, alliteration, and such lively images as Euphuism could supply. Finally, Hall's "Characters" are still further differentiated from the Greek by at least an attempt at subtlety of analysis. We are not simply told what a man does, but are made to enter into his mental processes so as to see what is the peculiar twist in his mind that makes him act as he does. In this attempt Hall often failed, as did many of his successors, the failure being due to the fact that both he and they were deficient in that rarest of human accomplishments—the ability to detect mental and moral differences.

To show how closely Hall followed his Greek model, and with what ingenuity he modernized the details to make them suit the manners of his own age, I have arranged in parallel columns certain passages from Hall's *Characterisms of Vices* and a translation of the corresponding passages in the Greek original.¹

¹The translation is that of Prof. R. C. Jebb in his edition of Theophrastus' *Characters* (Macmillan, 1870); while the text of Hall's *Characterisms* is that of the complete edition of his works published at London in 1747. Professor Jebb, himself, notes a few of these correspondences.

HALL.

"When he walks with his friend, he swears to him that no man else is looked at, no man talked of. He hangs upon the lips that he admireth, as if they could let fall nothing but oracles, and finds occasion to cite some approved sentence under the name he honoureth. Sometimes even in absence he extollet his patron, where he may presume of safe conveyance to his ears; and in presence he whispereth his commendation to a common friend, that it may not be unheard where he meant it."—*The Flatterer*.

"When he hath committed a message to his servant, he sends a second after him to listen how it is delivered. . . . He will ask his wife in bed if she has locked the wardrobe, and if the cupboard has been sealed, and the bolt put upon the hall-door; and if the reply is 'Yes,' not the less will he forsake the blankets and run about shoeless to inspect all these matters, and barely thus find sleep."—*The Distrustful*.

"Superstition is godless religion devout impiety. . . . This man dares not stir forth till his breast be crossed and his face sprinkled: if but an hare cross him the way, he returns. . . . If he see a snake unkilld, he fears a mischief. . . . In the morning he listens whether the crow crieth even or odd, and by that token presages of the weather. If he hear but a raven croak from the next roof he makes his will, or if a bittour fly over his head by night."—*The Superstitious Man*.

THEOPHRASTUS.

"The flatterer is a person who will say as he walks with another, 'Do you observe how people are looking at you?' . . . or will glance at him as he talks to the rest of the company . . . and will praise him, too, in his hearing."—*The Flatterer*.

"The distrustful man is one who, having sent his slave to market, will send another to find out what price he gave. . . . After his first sleep, he starts up and asks if the farthest gate were barred, and out of a fearful sweat calls up his servant, and bolts the door after him; and then studies whether it were better to lie still and believe, or rise and see."—*The Distrustful Man*.

"Superstition would seem to be simply cowardice in regard to the supernatural. The superstitious man is one who will wash his hands at a fountain, sprinkle himself from a temple font, put a laurel-leaf into his mouth, and so go about for the day. If a weasel run across his path, he will not pursue his walk until someone else has traversed the road. . . . If an owl is startled by him in his walk, he will exclaim 'Glory be to Athene!' before he proceeds."—*The Superstitious Man*.

HALL.

"No post can pass him without a question. . . . If he see but two men talk and read a letter in the street, he runs to them and asks if he may not be partner of that secret relation he offers to tell wonders, and then falls upon the report of the Scottish mine, or of the great fish taken up at Linn, or of the freezing of the Thames; and after many thanks and dismissals, is hardly entreated silence. . . . This man will also thrust himself forward to be the guide of the way he knows not."—*The Busy-body*.

"If his servant break but an earthen dish for want of light, he abates it out of his quarter's wages."—*The Covetous Man*.

"You shall find him prizing the richest jewels and fairest horses, when his purse yields not money enough for earnest."

"His talk is what exploits he did at Calais or Newport."

"Under pretense of seeking for a scroll of news, he draws out an handful of letters endorsed with his own style to the height, and half reading every title, passes over the latter part with a murmur, not without signifying what lord sent this, what great lady the other, and for what suits; the last paper (as it happens) is his news from his honourable friend in the French court."

THEOPHRASTUS.

"Also he will go up to his commanding officer and ask when he means to give battle, and what is to be his order for the day after to-morrow. . . ."—*The Officious Man*.

"On hearing the news from the Ecclesia, he hastens to report it; and to relate in addition the old story of the battle in Aristophon and of the Lacedæmonian victory in Lysander's time so that the hearers will either forget what it was about, or fall into a doze, or desert him in the middle and make their escape."—*The Loquacious Man*.

"He will undertake to show the path, and after all be unable to find it himself."—*The Officious Man*.

"When a servant has broken a jug or a plate, he will take the value out of his wages."—*The Penurious Man*.

"Also he will go up to the sellers of the best horses, and pretend that he desires to buy and quarrel with the slave for having come out without gold. . . ."

"He loves to impose upon his companions by the road with a story of how he served with Alexander."

"Then he will say that a letter has come from Antipater—this is the third—requiring his presence in Macedonia."

HALL.

"When he hath undertaken to be the broker for some rich diamond, he wears it; and pulling off his glove to stroke up his hair, thinks no eye should have any other object."—*The Vainglorious Man*.

"When a present is sent him, he asks 'Is this all?' and 'What, no better?' and so, accepts it."

"Every blessing hath somewhat to disparage and distaste it; children bring cares. . . ."

"It is hard to entertain him with a proportionable gift. If nothing, he cries out of unthankfulness, if little, that he is basely regarded; if much, exclaims of flattery and expectation of a large requital."—*The Malcontent*.

The publication of Hall's book of "Characters" was soon followed by that of others in which the influence of Theophrastus is only less apparent. Thus it is evident in the collection of "Characters" which appeared under the name of Sir Thomas Overbury in 1614;¹ and again in the *Microcosmography*, written by John Earle and published in 1628. I excerpt the following passages to show that the influence of Theophrastus was still strong.

¹ The full title was: *A Wife, now the Widow of Sir Thomas Overbury. Being a most exquisite and singular Poem of the choice of a Wife. Whereunto are added many witty Characters and conceited News, written by Himself and other learned Gentlemen his Friends.*

THEOPHRASTUS.

"When he is living in a hired house, he will say (to any one who does not know better) that it is the family mansion; but that he means to sell it, as he finds it too small for his entertainments."—*The Boastful Man*.

"Those who send him presents with their compliments at feast tide are told that he will not touch their offerings."—*The Surly Man*.

"The Grumbler is one who, when his friend has sent him a present from his table, will say to the bearer, 'You grudged me my soup and my poor wine, or you would have asked me to dinner.'"

"To one who brings him the good news, 'A son is born to you,' he will reply, 'If you add that I have lost half my property, you will speak the truth.'"

"If a subscription has been raised for him by his friends, and some one says to him 'Cheer up!' he will answer, 'When I have to refund the money to every man, and to be grateful besides, as if I had been done a service.'"—*The Grumbler*.

OVERBURY.

"He never spends candle but at Christmas (when he has them for New Year's gifts) in hope that his servants will break glasses for want of a light, which they double pay for in their wages."

"If he ever pray, it is that some one will break his day, that the beloved forfeiture may be obtained."

—*The Covetous Man.*

"He never salutes first,"—*The Proud Man.*

EARLE.

"He loves to pay short a shilling or two in a great sum."—*A Sordid Rich Man.*

"His mind is not much distracted with objects; but if a good fat cow come his way, he stands dumb and astonished, and though his haste be never so great, will fix here half an hour's contemplation."—*A Plain Country Fellow.*

THEOPHRASTUS.

"When a servant has broken a jug or a plate, he will take the value out of his wages."

"He is apt also to use the right of seizure of goods in satisfaction of a claim."—*The Penurious Man.*

"He will not permit himself to give the first salutation."—*The Arrogant Man.*

"It is just like him, too, when paying a debt of thirty minas, to withhold four drachmas."—*The Avaricious Man.*

"He shows surprise and wonder at nothing else, but will stand still and gaze when he sees an ox, or an ass, or a goat in the streets."—*The Boor.*

Hall, Overbury and Earle were the foremost writers of "Characters" of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The foregoing examples of their indebtedness to Theophrastus—an indebtedness, it may be added, which at least one of them freely acknowledged¹—are perhaps sufficient to set forth the close relation existing between the English "Character" and its Greek original. That a relation did exist has long

¹ In the "Proem" prefixed to his collection of "Characters," Hall says: "I have here done it as I could, following that ancient master of morality, who thought this the fittest task for the ninety and ninth year of his age, and the profitablest monument that he could leave for a farewell visit to his Grecians."

been known;¹ but that it was so close as an examination of the texts proves it to have been, has not hitherto been recognized.

To trace the further development of the "Character," till in the following century it merged into the novel, is quite beyond the scope of the present paper. Suffice it to say that in the hands of those who, following the lead of Hall, wrote in imitation of Theophrastus, the English "Character" remained as a literary form to a remarkable degree unchanged. Not till the de Coverley papers appeared, did it become apparent that the form of the "Character" had in a hundred years undergone any appreciable change. But while in form the "Character" had remained pretty constant, the uses to which it had been put had varied considerably. As a weapon of political satire it had suited the needs of that turbulent period when, in the intervals of more strenuous exchanges, Cavalier and Roundhead found solace in calling each other names. It continued throughout the century, both in France and England,² to exert an influence upon comedy, due to its availability as a vehicle of social satire.³

Of the "Character" we may say, in conclusion, we are not to think of it as a passing fashion, unrelated to all that went

¹"Character-Writing had its origin more than two thousand years ago in the *Ethic Characters* of Tyrtamus of Lesbos, a disciple of Plato, who gave him for his eloquence the name of Divine Speaker—Theophrastus." Henry Morley: *Character Writings of the Seventeenth Century*, p. 15.

²After the appearanse of La Bruyère's *Caractères* in 1688, which were imitated from Theophrastus, the writing of "Characters" became only less popular in France than in England, La Bruyère being followed by over thirty imitators.

³A case in point is Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, Act V, Scene IV, where Clitandre reads a letter written by Célimène in which are satiric "Characters" of her adorers. Clitandre's comment is: "D'un fort beau caractère on voit là le modèle." As is well known, Wycherly's *Plain Dealer* is adapted from this play; and it is interesting to observe that the scene just mentioned has its counterpart in the English play (Act II, Scene I), where Olivia characterizes her admirers in the manner which the "Character-writers" had made fashionable.

before or followed it. We are to think of it rather as a form of literary art, not the highest, but still a form of it; which had a definitely ascertainable beginning; which flourished for a century, having close relations with other forms of literary art; and finally did not die, but was absorbed by one more vital.

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